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THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE STUDY

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For many centuries of our civilization language study was confined to the Greek and Latin as the historic antecedents of our English tongue. But in more recent times question has arisen concerning the relative educational value of the ancient languages as compared with the modern, particularly the French and German. This problem, once raised, has grown into an acrimonious partisan contention, but apparently without any clear understanding as to the determining grounds of the respective claims. At least the debate continues with indecision and confusion. No better evidence of this fact could be found than in two "Occasional Papers" recently published by the General Education Board which take diametrically opposed views on the value of the study of the classics. Viscount Bryce, formerly British ambassador to the United States, writes on "The Value of Ancient Literature to the Modern World," and concludes that the knowledge of Greek and Latin is essential to culture and constitutes a refreshment of spirit in a world full of complexities and alarms. President Eliot of Harvard, on the other hand, in writing on "Latin and the A.B. Degree," maintains that Latin and Greek must be discarded as having served but no longer serving a useful purpose.

The clamor in behalf of the modern languages has come particularly from the ranks of the natural scientists. Their motives have been purely utilitarian. That is, they have cast upon the Greek and Latin the opprobrium of being *dead* languages and of little service in modern education; whereas the modern languages, as *living* tongues, they hold to be practically useful for conversation and commercial purposes, and especially for present-day literary and scientific culture. The classicists, on the other hand, have urged the study of Greek and Latin rather more from traditional

prejudice than from any clear insight into the real superiority of the ancient languages for education and culture; that is, their advocacy of these languages has proceeded from a somewhat vague and undefined belief in their superiority rather than from reasoned convictions drawn from demonstrably true principles.

The strife for these contending claims has been waged largely in the colleges and universities of the United States. The outcome has been predominantly in favor of the modern languages, with a decided lapse in the study of the ancient languages. Formerly preparation in Greek and Latin were the universal conditions for admission to the colleges and universities of this country. Up to about fifty years ago the lectures in the German universities were delivered in Latin in all subjects, and the students were prepared to understand them as well or better than if they had been given in their mother-tongue. The professors of Greek, also, could speak that language as well as they could the Latin. This was relatively true of the other European universities, and Greek and Latin were at that time living languages because of their constant practical use.

In comparatively recent times in our own country the requirements for admission to college have been changed, until at present a large part of the institutions make no requirement of either Greek or Latin, permission being given to substitute French and German as the language requirements. However, not all the colleges have yielded to the current pressure in this regard. Amherst College and Hamilton College yet require Latin as a preparation for admission to those institutions; and perhaps there may be a few others which do the same. It is also of interest to note that a reaction has already set in, and that a greater value is beginning to be placed on the ancient languages as instruments of knowledge and culture. It is significant, for example, that Latin is being required for admission to certain schools of science, notably in the University of Michigan and elsewhere. Thus the natural scientists themselves are apparently beginning to recognize Latin at least as an indispensable preparation for thorough scientific investigation.

In view of these facts it appears worth while to take up the problem of language study anew and seek to determine whether

there may be any fundamental principles found by means of which the prevalent contention may be finally negotiated.

In the first place, we may observe that the study of language is not an end in itself but only a means to an end, namely, *thought and knowledge*. And any language is valuable only as it serves this end. Words are the symbols of concepts, and concepts are products of the living mind; but the concepts themselves are the important things. Likewise the grammatical sentence is only the symbolical representation of the psychological judgment, and the judgment is the universal form of thought in every language. Language, therefore, must serve in an efficient and high sense as the instrument of thought and the mediator of knowledge in order to maintain a permanent position in the curriculum of studies. And it follows that the relative value of the ancient languages as compared with that of the modern languages must be determined by their respective peculiar excellence in this particular.

Language study, like that of all other subjects, results in two supreme values, namely, *mental discipline and specific knowledge*. So far as the mental disciplinary function of the respective languages is concerned we may assume, for our present purpose, that they are on a plane of equality. It would be a doubtful refinement to maintain that the study of any one language, rather than another, results in developing superior mental powers. Perhaps it may be granted that whatever language proves to be the harder to master for the given student would, in the nature of the case, be a severer mental discipline in such instance. And if any given language should in general prove to be more difficult to acquire than any other it might be said to contain greater disciplinary possibilities. But all this would depend so largely upon the individual personal equation and special contingent circumstances that it may be doubted whether any real principle or valid fact concerning the matter can be established.

It is true that many investigations have been made with a view to determining whether the study of the classics, for example, actually results in a superior type of student intelligence. But the results are far from conclusive. Different investigators claim to have found diametrically opposite conclusions. The problem

is extremely complex, and the facts are too uncertain to admit of decisive judgment. But even if it were a fact that the classical students average higher in their general mental attainments than any others, this would prove nothing as to the superiority of those languages for mental discipline. For there is always the possibility that the high-school student who is studying Greek and Latin is likely to be a distinctly different type of mind and person from all others; that is, he is generally one who has before him the vision and purpose of a college course, prompted perhaps by aspiring parents as well as teachers. Consequently it may be assumed that the higher type of mind, the more ambitious student in general, is the one who undertakes the study of Greek and Latin, and for that very reason is likely to be superior in the study of other subjects as well.

Accordingly we may waive all claim to the superior mental disciplinary value of any one language over that of any other. Solution of the problem of language study, therefore, cannot be found in this principle, but decision must be obtained from a consideration of the relative value of the several languages as instruments of knowledge, or the practical usefulness which they serve. In other words, the adjudication of the problem must be made on the natural scientist's own ground—that of *utility*. But in the nature of the case the utility of any language must vary according to the end sought or the character of the purpose we have in view. And in this relation there are conceivably three clearly defined ends to which language study may be directed: (1) the acquirement of a language for commercial or professional use; (2) the acquirement of a language as a means of initiation into the literature enshrined within it; (3) the acquirement of a language for the useful insight it may give us into our mother-tongue in general and into scientific terminology in particular.

PROFESSIONAL USE OF LANGUAGE

Relative to the professional use of a language it is evident there must be a more thorough mastery of it than is usually the case in our schools. If the end be to actually speak a modern language, this would involve personal intercourse with the peoples who use

it; but it is evident that such a use of any foreign language is a negligible end in this country. Apart from a few families who speak the languages of the countries from which they have come there is no opportunity whatever for the average American to make conversational use of such language. The best that can be said for the effort at gaining a speaking knowledge of foreign languages is that, in the nature of the case, it would be a very special education for the exceptional few who might stand in such relation as to have practical need of them. Evidently this could in no wise meet the general need of the vast mass of students in our schools.

The conversational or oral method of instruction is being more extensively used, both in the ancient and modern languages. This is good as a method. But if it be argued in behalf of French and German that they may, as living languages, be practically used, the answer must be that, as a matter of fact, not one person in thousands ever does make a speaking use of them in this country, even though he has gained a sufficient mastery of them to do so, the reason being that there is little opportunity, and without the practice of speaking them the languages are soon forgotten. Consequently for the average person long-continued drill in the speaking of the modern languages is time wasted. On the other hand, the necessity of such accomplishment for the special students who are looking professionally to teach or otherwise use the language throughout life is self-evident. It must also be confessed that a correct speaking knowledge of the modern languages is rarely accomplished in this country because of lack of actual contact with the languages in question. In view of these general facts there can be no dominant reason for the study of French and German in preference to Greek and Latin simply because they are present-day spoken languages. In polyglot Europe there is greater reason for the study of the several modern languages than with us because of actual necessity.

For persons who are preparing themselves for international commercial activities there may indeed be a need for the acquirement of a given language in such manner as to be able to speak and write it fluently. But in such cases it is evident that a very technical training in the practical use of the given language must be

obtained, which is quite apart from such training in the languages as is found possible to give in our average schools. That is, it must be the language of commerce. In general, even in such cases, the ability to *write* the language in so far as is required by ordinary commercial intercourse is all that would be demanded. And again it is evident that this pertains to a very special kind of education, and not to the general need of American students which the schools must seek to meet. For the greater part, therefore, a reading knowledge of the languages, either ancient or modern, is all that is to be desired or even hoped for. And certainly it must be admitted that it is a great advantage to be able to read any of the languages in question. For true scholarship, of course, this is indispensable. The thoroughgoing professional scholar must indeed be well grounded in both the ancient and modern languages, without which he is deficient in the implements of real scholarship. The problem of language study as such, therefore, need not be raised or discussed in this relation.

LANGUAGE AS THE MEDIUM OF LITERATURE

It is evident that if we will understand the genesis and history of science, literature, and philosophy we can do so only by a thorough knowledge of the languages in which the records have been written. No man can be a true historian in any other way. For example, the history of Greek philosophy could never have been written or understood apart from a mastery of the Greek language. The same would be equally true of the modern languages relative to the literature, science, and philosophy of modern times. Thus no one can ever grasp the meaning and full significance of the poetic art of Goethe, or the philosophic conceptions of Immanuel Kant, who has not so mastered the German language as to read it understandingly.

The superiority of either the ancient or modern languages in this relation would depend upon the question as to the relative cultural values of their respective literatures. And comparisons in this regard are certainly invidious. The content and significance of the literatures of these two realms are so different that there is hardly any basis for relative evaluation. Both are supreme within

their respective spheres. The genetic concepts and basal theories of science would be found in the ancient writings, but the more completed conceptions and theories of science must be found in the modern languages. Both the ancient and modern conceptions are so necessary to a complete grasp of science and philosophy that there is little choice or preference so far as the elementary student of language is concerned. And again it is evident that complete scholarship demands a knowledge of both the ancient and modern languages.

It is sometimes urged that ancient literature can be studied by means of translations, and that it is useless to spend the time in acquiring the languages which embody it. This may be granted so far as the average student is concerned, although some must be able to translate, otherwise we would have no translations. But it is also true that modern literature may be had largely in translations from the respective languages. And wherever translations are lacking the ideas contained in any language, if of significant worth, are sure soon to find their way into the current discussions in the English language. The world has become cosmopolitan, and the best ideas of the world are almost immediately disseminated by the daily press and current magazines to the ends of the earth.

It must be admitted that to the scholar a reading knowledge of the modern languages may be of very great advantage in keeping abreast with scientific progress. It is true that now and again there appear scientific works and current articles in French and German which can be obtained nowhere else. But it must be clear that this advantage of the modern languages pertains altogether to the professional scholar and not to the average student concerning whom the problem of language study in our schools is raised. The modern languages, therefore, have no great advantage over the ancient languages in the particular that their content can be obtained from translations, since what is true of the one is relatively true of the other.

The contention that the literature of the modern languages is far richer and more extensive, and consequently offers a much greater cultural value to the student, is irrelevant to our problem; for it is evident that the elementary student of languages never can, in

the nature of the case, read very extensively the literature in either field, and that in both languages the literature is far more extensive than will ever be used by any except the professional linguist. It must also be confessed that in our elementary study of the languages even a fluent and intelligent reading knowledge of them is rarely accomplished. It appears impossible to acquire this ability in the high schools by our present methods, and even in the colleges we meet with indifferent success. This results from our rather superficial prosecution of language studies in general.

Furthermore, no translation of a language is completely adequate. Hence he that will be initiated into the true literature of a language must possess that language itself. But again we must emphasize the fact that the problem of language study concerns, not the ideal of scholarship and the professionalist, but rather the meeting of the practical needs of the average student in our secondary schools and colleges, whereby all students may be best equipped for intelligent living, and the select minds, which seek it, best prepared for prosecuting their respective courses of higher education. Our choice of language studies, therefore, must depend upon those languages which best meet this purpose.

LANGUAGE STUDY AND OUR MOTHER-TONGUE

The contribution which language study makes to the understanding and right use of our mother-tongue is its most vital and practical significance for the average student. The English language is a composite. It is like a river, made up of many streams and rivulets emptying into it. It has appropriated terms more or less from almost every important language. But of these it must be acknowledged that Greek, Latin, and German (Saxon) are the largest sources. A very large part of English words come directly from Latin. And we have only to turn to the dictionary to discover that a large number of words are of Greek origin. All scientific and philosophic terminologies are practically exclusively from the Greek and Latin. But the German or Teutonic languages have, without doubt, been the second greatest source of the English language. So far as the French and all the other Romance languages are concerned they go back to the Latin for their origin,

and are accordingly negligible as root sources of the English language.

And now, it is evident, we can have no clear insight into the root meanings and exact content of the basal concepts in the English language without a knowledge of Greek, Latin, and German, the three richest sources of our mother-tongue. These, then, should form the basal language subjects for study in our schools. It must be clear that the student of Greek, Latin, and German will possess throughout his life an inner penetrative discrimination in the meaning of words, a far more efficient and cultured use of his English tongue, than would at all be possible by the study of any other languages or combination of languages. In relation to the genesis of the English language, therefore, apart from the German, the weight of fact and experience is decidedly on the side of the classics.

But there is still a much profounder reason for the study of Greek and Latin when we turn to the needs of real scholarship. And fundamentally it must be admitted that all our education ought to make toward this high aim. Not all students indeed will ever become scholars and thinkers; but since no one can determine in advance who actually will become such we must provide a scheme of education which finally, in the sifting process that must necessarily take place, will yield us as rich a harvest of great scholars and thinkers as is possible. We have been satisfied with the mediocre and indifferent. This attitude must be ended speedily. The future of the world will be determined by true science. We must, then, make true scientists, without which the nation must take a degraded position. In no other way shall the worthy fame of America be set on high. But scientific terminology, almost without exception, is derived from Greek and Latin. Any student who endeavors to study a science without a knowledge of Greek and Latin is almost irredeemably handicapped; the terminology of his science must forever be vague and meaningless symbols to him, the root meanings of which he never could understand. And if he ever succeeds in reaching the content of the basal concepts of his science it must be by overcoming the resistance of serious obstacles, which must inevitably impede his progress.

To make this matter concrete, consider the science of botany or medicine. The classifications in these sciences can never be understood thoroughly without a working knowledge of Latin. The terms used are almost exclusively from Latin. A true scholarship in these fields, therefore, is out of question without an understanding of the Latin terms which are in constant use. Or consider the realm of philosophy. Here practically all the terms are from the Greek, and it may equally be said that the inner content of the philosophic concepts have no language symbols until the root meanings of the terms are understood, and this is impossible apart from a knowledge of the Greek language. A man can never study philosophy in a thoroughly scientific and profound sense without a working knowledge of the Greek, from which his basal terms are derived. Like circumstance might be shown to exist in relation to biology, physics, chemistry, and all the other sciences. Take, for example, the term "psychology," and as it is derived bodily from the Greek it has no meaning whatever to the uninitiated. But when the student of Greek comes to the term he recognizes that it is composed of the words meaning *soul* and *science* in that language, and the meaning of "psychology" instantly becomes crystal clear to him as the *science of the soul or mind*. The terminology thus *aids* thought instead of *hindering* it.

Since language study is useful only in so far as it mediates knowledge for us, or serves as a tool of the mind, it must be admitted that in the very field of the natural scientists, who have clamored loudest for the retirement of the study of Greek and Latin, we have in these ancient languages a pre-eminent instrument of indispensable usefulness in scientific work and research which is without compare and unapproached by the modern languages. For this reason, therefore, Greek and Latin should have the primal place in the curriculum of language studies, particularly for those who are looking to the prosecution of a college course. And since it is evident that the study of language has as its supreme aim the service of scholarship, it follows that Greek and Latin, as the sources of all our scientific terminology and containing the very germs of all our philosophy and civilization, must in the nature of the case take precedence over all other languages as the instruments thereto.

But in relation to scholarship we must make no limitation. We have already seen that the modern languages as well as the ancient are required for this supreme goal. But because Greek and particularly Latin give us the best insight into the meaning of the English language, and thereby serve all students in the highest and most useful sense, and because the terminologies of all the sciences are almost entirely from these languages, Greek and Latin become the indispensable tools of true scholarship and should have the first place in all language study. And, furthermore, because they furnish the best possible preparation for successfully pursuing a college course and in general provide the strongest preparation for admission to the colleges, since they are the indispensable conditions of admission to some institutions and the best qualification for scientific work in all, we have these added practical reasons for the priority of the classics. From the study of Greek, Latin, and German, therefore, the students coming from our high schools are best equipped for either entering into practical life or entering upon a college career, so far as language study is concerned.

Apart from the professional student in the languages we know it to be a matter of fact that when the student in the schools and even in the colleges has once completed his studies and laid his books aside he rarely looks at them again so long as he lives. For this reason some have hastily concluded that all language study is useless and worse than folly. But not so; for, first of all, there is gained the mental discipline which results from such study, the supremest value obtained by the student from any subject in general; and, secondly, there is gained a working knowledge of the given language, which can be used upon demand, like that of the lawyer who can turn to a statute when he needs it; but lastly, and most valuable of all to the average student, there is gained an insight into the meaning of the mother-tongue which will serve with never-failing usefulness as long as he lives. Language is a tool which he has learned to use, and is a positive possession for all time. It is this usable residuum of language study which is the most valuable result so far as its instrumentality to knowledge is concerned. Consequently it is in this particular that the relative worth of the study of Greek and Latin as compared with that

of French and German is determined. It is the contribution of Latin, particularly, to the understanding of our mother-tongue that renders it superior to all competitors, and of Greek and German only in lesser degree.

PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS

From our preceding analysis of the problem it is evident that there must be certain differentiations of language study, determined by the specific ends which are to be sought.

First of all, we should seek to provide for a course of language study which would prove to be the most useful to our average high-school students who go out into practical life without further education. We have tried to make it very clear, in this case, that the languages which should be studied are those that will be the most helpful to an understanding and correct use of our English mother-tongue. And in this relation there can be no doubt but that Latin and German stand pre-eminently above all others, since the largest part of the words in common usage in the English tongue are derived from these two great sources. These two languages, therefore, should be required of all students. We should seek to send our high-school students out into life with as good a mastery of the English language as is possible. It is gratifying to know that a greater effort is now being made than ever before to give our students in the schools a thorough mastery of English; and so far as the languages are concerned which are to contribute most fundamentally to this worthy end Latin and German are without compare.

In the second place, we should so provide for language study in our high schools as to lay firm the foundations for admission to college and the attainment of true scholarship. It is evident that students who purpose to go to college should have a more thorough and elaborate training in language, the agency of science and learning, than the students who do not. And since we have seen that almost all scientific terminology is from Greek and Latin, and that a student must inevitably be handicapped who is ignorant of these languages as the instruments of real scholarship, it is evident that all students who are preparing to enter upon a college

course of study should have a working knowledge of the Greek language as well as the Latin for that reason. All such students should have a knowledge of the German the same as those who do not go to college because of its powerful influx into our mother-tongue as well as for its agency in present-day scientific and literary investigation.

But since it is impossible, in advance of the fact, to determine what students actually will go to college, it becomes necessary to provide such a course of study in the languages as will render the best service in general to all students and make special provision for the needs of such as ultimately determine to enter upon the college career. To meet this rather complex requirement, perhaps the best that can be done is to say that Latin and German should be required of all students in the high schools, and that in the Senior year, at least, Greek should be required of such students as are purposing to enter college. It may be assumed that by the Senior year all students have about reached decision as to their immediate future, and particularly as to whether they intend to go to college; and the study of the Greek may thus well be left until such conclusion is made. The opportunity is here offered to the wise teacher and principal to guide the young under their care to right decisions, which they themselves are not wholly fitted to do.

Finally, in the case of those who prove to be especially fond of language study and purpose to devote their lives to teaching or otherwise professionally to deal with the languages as a vocation nothing need be said, for it goes without saying that such persons can make no limitation of the languages they pursue for professional ends. But even for such prospective professional students in language, Greek, Latin, and German alone can satisfactorily be offered to them in the high schools. Their real professional work must be begun in their college course, and naturally must include all the interests of philology and the philosophy of language. In the high interest of thorough scholarship as such all encouragement should be given to such students by providing them with all resources demanded for the efficient prosecution of their studies. But in the case of the professional linguist Greek and Latin must necessarily be the basal subjects.

In conclusion a word must be said concerning the time to be devoted to language study in the schools. The usual arrangement in the high schools at present is to spend three years in the study of Latin and two years in the modern languages. We believe this program cannot be improved, provided the modern language be German, and that both Latin and German be so pursued that special emphasis be placed by teachers on the derivation of the English language from them. In other words, the language study in the high schools should be directed to the specific end of illuminating the meaning and discriminative significance of our mother-tongue. This must be the greatest universal value of language study, and can be easily done in connection with these languages as usually pursued by simply directing the student's attention constantly to the derivation of English words from the Latin and German as they arise in the regular courses of study.

In addition to these two basal languages, as we have indicated, one year of Greek, and preferably two years where possible, should be required of all students who are purposing to pursue a college course. This should be put in the last year or the last two years of the high school. Even one year of Greek should give the student a knowledge of the alphabet, elements, and a select group of root words that would serve as a minimum working knowledge of the language, and would enable him, upon occasion, adequately to determine the significance of the scientific terminology and other words in the English which are derived or coined from the Greek. Three years of Latin, two years of German, and one year of Greek for candidates for admission to college seem to be the best that can be done with our present crowded curriculum in the high schools. This program seems to care best for the interests of the general student body and at the same time meet the minimum need of the special students who are looking to a higher education.

Of course there are special cases which will demand exception to this general rule of procedure. For example, students who are expecting to enter upon professional work in teaching French and the Romance languages must necessarily be given opportunity in such languages, and must probably substitute French for German in the high school. But such exceptions do not alter the rule so

far as the greater mass of the students are concerned. And it is the general student body which our problem of language study concerns more than any other. To make language study practically valuable is the end.

If, then, the conclusions we have reached be valid, it follows that the natural scientists and all others who have been clamoring for the retirement of Greek and Latin in behalf of French and German have gone far astray. Our simple contention is that Latin, particularly, is the most valuable language study to the young people in our high schools because of its unique usefulness in connection with our mother-tongue; and that German alone, of the modern languages, is of great value in relation to the origin and meaning of the English language; finally, because of the fact that scientific and philosophic terminologies are largely from Greek as well as Latin, both Greek and Latin are indispensable for a real foundation of scholarship. All advantages claimed for the study of the modern languages, as compared with the ancient languages, fall into insignificance beside the supreme usefulness of Greek and Latin as giving us insight into our English tongue and furnishing us with the basal concepts of all science and philosophy. The natural scientists themselves are the ones to lose most by the retirement of the classics.

We beg, therefore, to urge upon all teachers and directors of our secondary schools a faithful consideration of the claims herein set forth for language study, with the hope that a surer foundation may be laid for our universal scholarship. If America is to have a profound and genuine scholarship, we can never afford to turn away from the classics as the basal implements of science and learning.